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ABSTRACT

In addition to problems of instrument selection and interpretation and problems associated with sampling procedures, psychologists' person-blame interpretations of social problems (interpretations that call for change in individuals and ignore needs for systemic change) and gender beliefs (such as assumptions about women and motherhood, men and power) present obstacles to meaningful research on parenting. These obstacles are specific instances of the general problems of the influence of assumptions about reality on scientific inquiry and bias in the conduct of research. Future parenting research should employ the Parental Role Scales (PRS), an instrument focusing on parental role perceptions in dual-working families and on the way perceived parental role demands are met in these families. The PRS can be used to study situational, personal, and attitudinal parenting variables, as well as to explore the influence of social changes on parents' enactment of roles and to assess theories which predict differential enactment of roles for mothers and fathers. (Author/RH)

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Symposium: Meeting Parental Role Responsibilities in a Changing Society: The Dual-Career Family, Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Assoication, Los Angeles, California August 1981

Future Parenting: What issues need attention?

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The three papers presented earlier in this symposium are based on research conducted on parenting in a changing society. Dr. Hanson discussed the development of our new measure, Perceptions of Parental Roles Scales (Note 6) that has direct relevance for research on contemporary parenting. Dr. Elman reported on factors influencing strategies for coping with conflict between the parental and professional roles in career women with preschool children, and Beverly Davis and Linda Manning discussed findings about the father-child relationship gathered from in-depth interviews with professional men in dual-career families. I am sure that many of you thought of many possibilities for additional studies in these and other aspects of parenting. I have several directions to suggest as possibilities as well. Before doing this, however, I would like to discuss possible obstacles to doing research on parenting that pertains to current parenting as well as to changes in parenting which may be occurring in dual-career families. Let us turn first then to what could keep us from addressing relevant questions, from getting an accurate picture of the reality of dual-career families, and of perpetuating stereotypes or myths about these people and their children. These are the issues that need attention first.

Parts of this paper are taken from Gilbert, L. A., Impediments to research on parenting. In L. A. Gilbert and M. S. Richardson (Eds.), Parenting in Contemporary Society. Special issue of The Counseling Psychologist, in press.

Issues that Need Attention

Two issues that need attention in future parenting research are what I call (a) assumptions about reality and (b) bias in the conduct of research. Clearly these two areas overlap: assumptions about reality influences how research is conducted and vice versa. For the purposes of discussion, however, let's keep them separate.

Assumptions about reality

Turning first to assumptions about reality, let us briefly consider two aspects: beliefs about personal responsibility and beliefs about gender roles.

Beliefs about personal responsibility. Caplan and Nelson (1973) eloquently describe the "person-blame" causal attribution bias in psychological research on social problems. By this they mean the tendency of researchers (a) to focus on person-centered characteristics that reside within the individual and to ignore relevant situational factors that are external to the individual, and (b) to attribute causal significance to these person-centered variables when they are found in statistical association with a particular social problem. The result is a person-blame interpretation of social problems. As Caplan and Nelson point out, this tendency towards person-blame interpretations of social problems derives to a great extent from deeply rooted values about personal responsibility held by social scientists. (As will be pointed out later cf. p. 5

person-centered attributions about causality also serve to maintain the status quo. A person-centered definition of social problems calls for individual change, but a situation-centered definition calls for systemic change.)

Let us look now at a problem related to parenting that is often attributed to individual causes, although it might more appropriately be attributed to systemic causes.

Caplan and Nelson note that "the victims of poor planning become treated as if they were the cause of the situation in which they find themselves" (p. 208). A case in point is working career women who are mothers. They are victims of poor planning at the societal level in the sense that there has been a greater change in that status of women in the workplace than in the home (Bernard, 1976; Presser, Note 1; Rossi, 1980). Thus, although the work world is relatively more prepared to handle women on an equal basis with men, in the world of the family women who work still carry disproportionate responsibility for the home and children (Gilbert, Note 2; Roland & Harris 1979). Yet Career women who are mothers or who want to parent as well as continue their careers uninterruptedly are viewed by many as "wanting to have it all," as if their greediness, rather than inadequate child-care programs and institutional biases about who has primary responsibility for child-rearing, is the cause of their role conflict and role overload. Hence, role conflict in women is studied as a form of deviance and as a personal problem.

Let's look now at the second assumption about reality.

Beliefs about gender roles. Most cultures, including our own, have prescribed and sanctioned different sets of traits and behaviors for the members of each gender, thereby limiting the activities and roles in which women and men typically engage.

The 1980s, however, are characterized by a heightened awareness of gender-role beliefs and gender-related stereotypes and by an increased sensitivity to changing roles. Blake (Note 3) views these changes in roles as evidence for the

demise of the "structurally differentiated family and an emerging evolution in family structure" (p. 7) in which family responsibilities are no longer dictated by gender. A less positive note is sounded by Bernard (1981a), however. She agrees that a subtle revolution is realigning family roles. At the same time Bernard cautions us about the "host of social-psychological obstacles related to gender identity that have to be overcome before a new social-psychological structure can be achieved" (p.1).

Let us consider two social-psychological obstacles related to gender-role beliefs that have direct bearing on issues in the area of parenting. The first concerns women and motherhood, and the second men and power.

Turning first to women and mothehood, a number of sociologists and psychologists (cf. Kanter, 1977; Kamerman, 1979) have begun to note the obvious interactions between work and family. Books and articles about working mothers have mushroomed. The issues of the dual-career family are being considered in the laboratory and in the editorials of prestigious newspapers such as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal (Gilbert, Note 2). The question remains, however, as to whether these more recent formulations are being incorporated into social scientists' views about parenting.

A partial answer to this questions can be found by perusing available literature. A very recent 340-page handbook on parent education, for example, devotes one page to maternal employment. The two pages devoted to values and roles in regard to work and family clearly illustrate resistance to changing beliefs about parenting. The author even finds "scientific" evidence to support his own views (emotional ties to the children are more important to mothers than to fathers...).

Whether this example is representative of the field in general is, of course, difficult to determine. The power of the motherhood mandate (Russo, 1979), however,

would suggest that the view presented in this example is not an isolated case.

What about men and power? Although we may agree that in the long run men have as much to gain from gender role changes as do women, in the short run women clearly stand to gain more power and men to lose some (Rossi, 1978b). This situation may make it difficult to act upon agreed rules of equity in one's private life and professional judgments. Thus, although men today may derive great satisfaction from their family roles, this does not necessarily mean they are willing to sacrifice loss of power or status for the sake of those roles (Bernard, 1981a; Kahn & Kahn, Note 4).

Similarly, although scientists may want to believe that they do not feel threatened by changing roles, their behavior may indicate otherwise. They may, for example, be resistant to considering particular kinds of interpretations of human behavior or to investigating certain topics for research. Here again examples are not hard to come by. Women's issues are still largely a single-gender subject, both in the academic classroom and in the real world. Moreover, research on women's concerns is often devalued (Gilbert, 1981). Studies addressing how men use power to maintain their position in the family or in the work world are rare. Investigating what enables men to be relatively single-minded in their pursuit of personal achievement is also unusual. (Investigations of factors that enhance this pursuit are plentiful.) In summary, then, these two social psychological obstacles in the area of gender role beliefs are important for researchers to keep in mind.

Resistance to change. The three main issues raised thus far--beliefs in personal responsibility, beliefs about women and motherhood, and beliefs about men and power--share a common factor: they all can operate to maintain the status quo. Social scientists, not unlike the general public, are often blinded to the implicit rules governing the prevailing societal norms.

We can make a number of speculations about motivations to maintain "things as they are" in regard to parenting. Clearly, the need to sustain romanticized notions of the family is one possible motivation (Uzoka, 1979). Also likely motivations include the needs to hold on to traditional theories of family intervention and child development. A third possibility, mentioned earlier, is that "keeping things as they are" benefits the present power structure.

Two recent articles in widely read publications make clear how these motivations underlie the interpretations of events at the societal level. The first article, "At Long Last Motherhood, " appeared in Newsweek magazine (Langway, 1981) and described the "profound baby hunger among women who have put off having children." Says one woman early in the article, "After I had my daughter, I found I wanted to stay home more. I said, "wow, what happened to the career woman?"" The article closes with the statement "Madonnalike serenity is rare among new mothers--but it may well sweep the nursery as more old hands at ruling the working world start rocking cradles as well." The question arises as to whose old hands--female and male?[2]

The second article appeared in the business section of the Sunday New York Times (Thurow, 1981) and concerned "Why Women are Paid Less than Men." The author, a professor of economics and management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, notes that the decade between 25 and 35 years of age, which is essential to career development and advancement, is precisely the decade when women are most likely to leave the labor force to have children. In view of this situation he sees essentially two avenues for equalizing male and female earnings:

> Families where women who wish to have successful careers, compete with men, and achieve the same earnings should alter their family plans and have their children either before 25 or after 35. Or society can attempt to alter

> the existing promotion and skill acquisition system so that there is a longer time period in which both men and women can attempt to successfully enter the labor force.

What is the avenue he neglected to mention?[3]

Thus, not unlike social scientists, commentators on the social scene focus on how women, but not men, combine parental and occupational roles. In so doing, they, too, subtly resist social change.

Bias in the Conduct of Research

This section describes possible obstacles to meaningful research that could occur at various levels of scientific inquiry. Many of the points made earlier in regard to what constitutes reality are directly applicable here, since understanding individuals requires that "we understand the times and the larger societies of which they are parts" (Sherif, 1979, p. 127). The examples to be discussed fall into two general areas: instrument selection and interpretation and sampling procedures, including the effects of cohort particularity.

Instrument selection and interpretation. Many existing measures related to parenting were developed within a set of assumptions about causality and role behavior that are no longer ascribed to. The criteria used and the measures constructed typically assessed adjustment or some other variable according to societal expectations for individual behavior. Moreover these measures and criteria ignored societal influences on individuals and the effect of societal constraints on women's and men's lives. Hence existing measures and criteria must be carefully scrutinized before being used in research.

As you may recall, the Parental Role Scales developed by Gilbert and Hanson (Note 6) was made necessary because of changing views about parenting.

Sampling procedures. Let's speculate for a moment about how bias could occur here. Suppose as a scientist one had easier access to the preschool aged children of employed mothers than to the preschool aged children of mothers who are not employed. Should this be the case, the former group could become identified as the one with "problems," thus reinforcing pre-existing notions about the harmful effects of maternal employment on children. In addition, the availability of a population for study could determine what kinds of questions are investigated. Studying the quality and effects of care provided to children in day-care centers, for example, is far easier than studying the effects of shared parenting on children in dual-career families. Not only is making the necessary assessments far less difficult in child-care centers than in private homes, but the research itself is also less likely to be at odds with common attitudes about who should be the primary parent. Consequently, the first area might receive far greater attention than the second. Moreover the data gathered in the day-care situation could easily be interpreted within existing conceptualizations of female role behavior (i.e., women assume primary responsibility for parenting although they are employed full-time) rather than within theoretical formulations that assume significant shifts in parental role responsibilities which may be more in line with reality. As these examples illustrate, the focusing of scientific inquiry on the behavior of a particular group can unwittingly serve to preserve outdated views of parenting.

A related problem is that of outmoded data and what Rossi (1980) calls cohort particularity. Namely, the results of studies carried out under one set of social conditions cannot be generalized to social conditions that have changed. Hence, previously collected data on parenting specific to a particular cohort of individuals may not be an accurate reflection of current conceptions of parenting. Thus, studies

on the effects of shared parenting conducted when this behavior is still unusual in our society may have little relevance once shared parenting becomes more common. Similarly, data on the effects of maternal employment may differ depending on whether they are gathered when maternal employment is a deviant or a dominant pattern.

Directions for Future Research

Keeping in mind the points made thus far regarding assumptions about reality and bias in the conduct of research, let us turn briefly to two possible directions for future research in the area of parenting. I will limit myself to research that involves the Parental Role Scales (Gilbert & Hanson, Note 6) since we want all of you to use this measure in your research. As will be recalled, the development of the Parental Role Scales was undertaken because no instrument was available to research questions regarding parental role perceptions in dual-working families and the meeting of perceived parental role demands in these families. Thus, a first direction for future research is using this measure to assess who meets or carries out these parental role responsibilities in dual-career families, what stresses are associated with carrying them out, and what personal and situational variables moderate the relationship between various parenting role responsibilities and indices of stress and coping. Personal variables such as self-esteem and parental and work role satisfaction, and, situational variables such as the kind and quality of child care, the degree of spouse support, the number of children, the nature of the family unit, and the level of income might be investigated. Another important question to consider is what part parents want institutional representatives and societal agents to have in meeting the various parental role responsibilities included in the Parental Role Scales, whether institutional representatives would be willing to assume greater responsibility in situations where both parents are employed full-time, and if so, in what parenting domains.

A second direction for research is to explore the parenting domains included in the Perceptions of Parental Role Scales in regard to theories of parental role responsibilities that predict differential role enactments for mothers and fathers. Traditionally, child rearing and household duties have been assigned to the mother, and the provider duties to the father, with both parents being involved in the socialization of the child. As Bernard (1981) points out, however, new demands are being put on men infulfilling what she calls the "good provider role". These demands include more intimacy and nurturance and more sharing of child care. Similarly, more pressure is being put on women to share the provider role (Blake, 1980). The influence of these changes at the societal level on the role enactments of mothers and fathers is an exciting and rich area for researchers. In addition to providing information regarding who enacts various responsibilities within the parental role, data will be made available to challenge or to corroborate existing assumptions about who carries out certain parenting functions and their competence in carrying them out. One may very well find that the areas of perceived parental role responsibilities among parents in dual-career families, as assessed by the Parental Role Scales, are not appreciable different from what has traditionally been the case, but that assumptions regarding role enactment in these area -- whether by gender of parent or by inta- vs. extra familial agents--may have undergone rather dramatic shifts. Thank you.

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Footnotes

1. One could argue, for example, that because women are assumed to be communal in nature, they are viewed as wanting to take responsibility for taking care of others. In contrast, because men are assumed to be basically agentic in nature and needing to attend to the mastery of their environment, which involves the development of their own achievement and independence, they are viewed as rightfully needing to use their financial resources in other ways.
2. Answer: female.
3. Answer: combined parental and work roles for both spouses; that is, the woman (or the man) does not leave the labor force to have a child.

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